Lewis Mumford's Contributions to the History of Cities: A Critical Appraisal

Janet Abu-Lughod

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When I was still in high school, there were four books I read that left a life-shaping effect on everything I have since thought about cities. Two of those -- Techniques and Civilization (first published in 1934), and The Culture of Cities (first published in 1938) -- were written by Lewis Mumford. They made an urbanist out of me, and I was not alone. Single-handedly, Mumford's writings placed cities on the agenda of ordinary Americans.

But I must confess that until I was honored by this invitation to lecture at the Lewis Mumford Center, I had not opened those two books since college days, nor, for many decades, had I taken down from my bookshelf his enormous The City in History (1961), despite its pride of place.

So I am deeply grateful to Professor John Logan for encouraging me to think seriously about Mumford's lifetime contributions, a task which -- once I checked my library's computerized index and realized I had only skimmed the surface of a small fraction of the more than 60 items listed -- was clearly

beyond my capacity, The breadth of his interests was far wider than I had ever realized, encompassing not only architecture and cities, but philosophy, morality, and, of course, public policy, including a piece on "Alternatives to the H Bomb."

So although I had originally intended my talk to be a critical "evaluation" of the thought of this renaissance man. I quickly revised my agenda downward to a much humbler project: namely, to trace the origins of his views and to explore how, in turn, his voice (which I imagine to have been booming!) still speaks to us as we continue to grapple with issues he forced to our attention. His controversial opinions have shaped our approaches to cities, both pro and con, and many of his ideas have become so embedded in the general debate about cities that most urban scholars take them for granted without attribution.

Since there is no way a brief lecture can summarize his voluminous contributions, or even paraphrase a single book, I shall try to do several less ambitious things.

First, I want to acknowledge, with a bit of embarrassment, how much I and my urbanist colleagues have simply incorporated his books into our own understandings of cities, with nary a footnote, although always a nod to him in our bibliographies. This may be quite fitting, because Mumford himself so often speaks ex cathedra, with not a single footnote to show his source, although he always included references to authors and extensive bibliographies.

Second, I want to try to convey to those of you who have yet

had the pleasure of reading him, some taste or flavor of his pungent, flowery, but often acerbic writing "style;" it was not just his erudition, but his sometimes intemperate way of putting matters that captured his readers' imaginations and emotions.

And third, I want to acknowledge (I hope dispassionately) both his flawed historical knowledge, as demonstrated in the earlier chapters added in The City in History, and his prescient critiques of the future, which can be found in the final few chapters of the same book, because they reveal so transparently how his philosophy and values were translated into failed prescriptions.

As I reviewed his major contributions I came to think of him as a sturdy bridge between past and future, a powerful voice in the still ongoing DEBATES about what cities are for. He raised that voice to declare optimistically that cities, at their best, could facilitate a rich life of freedom and humanity, but sadly, at their worst, have often yielded sterility and/or disorder. And since my lecture will be a roast as well as a eulogy, I shall have to point out where he led us astray.

But first: Who was this prolific scholar, born in 1895, whose influence persists a hundred years later? Some biographies are available, filled with fascinating details, but I shall not review their contents. Rather, let me paint a quick picture and then turn to his own remarks about what sources most shaped his ideas.

I myself never met him, although I treasure the gracious

letter he sent me (dated 18 March 1970 in elegant orthography), dashing my hopes that he might write a foreword to my forthcoming history of Cairo. He tactfully declined, citing the press of his own deadlines, but encouraged me with, inter alia, the following phrase: "I am delighted with your approach & fascinated by the prospects your new work opens up." How many other young scholars did he encourage in this way! I suspect thousands.

A recent book I adore, The Writer's Desk by Jill Krementz, includes photographs of 55 famous American authors in their "writing habitats," with brief quotations from them about their "writing habits." Most of the writers are dressed sloppily and many are shoeless. Most of their offices are messy and cluttered (the worst is Jean Piaget's). Many of the quotations are about how hard it is to write and describe the "rituals" they follow to get started.

Lewis Mumford is an absolute deviant (see pp. 14-15). The photo, taken in Amenia in 1971, shows, in serious profile, a fit-looking man whose receding hairline has left a shining frontal pate. He is dressed in a conservatively patterned shirt and is shown putting fountain pen to white paper with fine script. The desk is large but virtually clear, the bookshelves to his left are equally orderly. What is most striking, however, is his filing system for (I would assume) current projects. Again, neatly arranged on the wall in front of him are numerous perfectly aligned sets of uniformly sized papers, each attached vertically by a really big binder clip. I suspect he never had

"writer's block," and I thought: wow, if we were all that organized, perhaps we could produce more, albeit not better, books. I think, however, that the orderly arrangement of his desk is symbolic: it reveals all too clearly his preoccupation with order in cities and suburbs..

The accompanying quotation, extracted from a letter Mumford wrote to his friend Van Wyck Brooks in 1935, also reveals something else. He was what we might call a testy character. He frets about how much time he had recently lost by endless train travel to give speeches (this time on War and Fascism), squandering himself "in unimportant lectures to vacuous people." He goes on:

> **One is damned in one's work, not by the cohorts of Satan...; but by all the little Children of Light who bait one with their good intentions.... Henceforward, I shout to the heavens, I shall deliver no more lectures on behalf of good causes.... Avaunt! importuning world! Back to my cell...**[1]

We're grateful that he did go back to that comfortable cell. And it is not inaccurate to think of him primarily as a writer. He certainly saw himself that way. In his April 1967 Washington testimony at a public hearing before the Ribicoff Committee on governmental expenditures, he says point blank:

> **By profession I am a writer -- not an architect, an**

[1]As quoted in Krementz, p. 15.

> **engineer, or a city planner; and although I have been a professor of * city and regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania, I have no wish to appear before you as an urban specialist, an "expert," an authority.**

But then he continues: "But please do not read any false humility into this statement;" it is meant to distinguish myself "from the usual folly of those professions."[2]

This testimony was particularly revealing of his intellectual biography. He notes that:

> **While still at college, in fact, when only eighteen, I came under the influence of the Scots thinker Professor Patrick Geddes,[3] who shares with Ebenezer Howard,[4] Raymond Unwin,[5] and our own Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.,[6]**

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[2]Source: "A Brief History of Urban Frustration," in the collection of his shorter pieces in Lewis Mumford, The Urban Prospect (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968 edition, pp. 208-226). Quotation from p. 208 t*o 209.

[3]From whom Mumford was later to adapt the vivid terminology of Geddes's influential Cities in Evolution (London, 1915), with its graphic negative phrases for successive "deteriorations," from paleotechnic (early industrial city) on down to its ending in "necropolis."

[4]See his Garden Cities of To-Morrow, first published in 1902. The original version of Ebenezer Howard's small but influential book was To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform, issued in 1898, only three years after Mumford's birth.

[5]Sir Raymond Unwin was the planner in 1903 of the first "Garden City:" Letchforth in England.

[6]The planner, inter alia, of New York's Central Park, Chicago's park system, and the campus of Stanford University.

> **the distinction of not only reviving the art of town planning, but also of awakening fresh interest in the nature and function of cities. Though there are now scores of books and college courses on every aspect of urbanism, half a century * ago you could almost count them on the fingers of one hand.[7]**

He never freed himself of that early imprinting, and in his many reviews of the work of others (among the most scathing are those directed at Jean Gottmann and at poor Jane Jacob, whom he calls an idiot), he judged others by how well they understood Geddes and Howard and therefore, let us admit, how much they agreed with him. Because the most remarkable thing about Lewis Mumford is how consistently, over his lifetime, he adhered to and applied the views and values of these authors who had made their chief contributions in the opening years of the twentieth century. So evaluating Mumford's contributions means going back really far in time.

I therefore decided to reread Ebenezer Howard's small gem, Garden Cities of To-morrow (first published in 1898 and revised in 1904), and Patrick Geddes's Cities in Evolution (first published in 1915) to better evaluate how those sources had shaped him. The results were astonishing.

From Patrick Geddes he had taken his historical approach to cities (albeit only European and only starting in medieval

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[7]Ibid., pp. 209-210.

times). Quite directly, in his Techniques and Civilization, Mumford drew upon this fount, incorporating the colorful terms -- eotechnic, paleotechnic, and neotechnic -- that Geddes had "invented" to describe eras shaped by preindustrial technology, by steam and coal energy, and the cleaner technology made possible through electricity.

In Techniques and Civilization Mumford takes these concepts far beyond the modest neologisms of Geddes, however, tracing out in detail the evolution of science and technological innovations. And whereas Geddes had a perhaps naive faith in the neotechnic phase, hopeful that it would yield a eutopia of cleanliness and health, the darker sides of modernity were already part of Mumford's manichean philosophy. As Mumford notes:

> **Today this unquestioned faith in the machine has been severely shaken.... [for] a variety of reasons. One of them is the fact that the instruments of destruction in-*geniously contrived in the machine shop and the chemist's laboratory, have become in the hands of raw and dehumanized personalities a standing threat to the existence of organized society itself.... What is the use of conquering nature if we fall a prey to nature in the form of unbridled men? What is the use of equipping mankind with mighty powers to move and build and communicate, if the final result of this secure food supply and this excellent organization is to enthrone**

the morbid impulses of a thwarted humanity?[8]

His criticism goes even deeper. Drawing on Thorsten Veblen, he argues that mastery has given even greater strength to capitalist enterprises, so that "the human gains of technics have been forfeited by perversion in the interests of a pecuniary economy."

His solution was that we needed to move beyond mechanical to "organic" organization. Only then can "permanent gain" result in "real enrichments".... in thought and action and emotional experience, in play and adventure and drama and personal development."[9] If one were to identify the unifying thread of humanism that permeates his later writings, whether scholarly or polemical, this statement would be it -- and it was already central to his philosophy in 1934!

For the physical setting in which these humanistic goals can be achieved, Mumford turned to the work of Ebenezer Howard (and to Unwin, who set forth his ideas in Town Planning in Practice, and his actual "practice" in designing Letchworth, the first garden city, built incorporate Howard's ideas). Mumford saw in Howard's prescriptions the right way to harness the new technologies to achieve organic order and intimacy, while putting stringent limits on the pecuniary process. Only by reorganizing the settlement patterns of an urbanized society into relatively discrete but interlinked towns, each made up of neat homes for

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[8]Techniques and Civilization, pp. 365-366.

[9]pp. 377-378.

30,000 people, surrounded by green open space but linked by external highways to similar "buds" and "centers," could citizens enjoy "play, drama, adventure and personal development."

Neotechnic science could make possible this return to the smaller scale of social life found in successful preindustrial towns, but without their diseases and niggardly surplus. He not only glorifies the handful of Garden Cities built in the first third of the twentieth century, but thought he had found in Sunnyside Gardens, Long Island, where he lived for a while, a scale of housing and density equivalent to cities of earlier times. In contrast to this ideal he saw the "mass" city that could only dehumanize.

Indeed, nowhere in his writings is this contrast stated so pungently as in certain portions he added on the Greek Polis and Rome when he expanded his Culture of Cities into the fuller version that appears in The City in History. Even though chapters 9 through 16 incorporate modified or expanded versions of the former book, in The City in History Mumford has added introductory chapters to trace the story of cities farther back than medieval Europe. He begins with sanctuaries, villages, and strongholds, weaves ambitiously back and forth in time and space, taking us through, en passant, the ancient city, the Greek polis, Hellenism, religious medievalism, the structure of Baroque power and capitals, the expansion of commercialism, and the horrors of early industrial "coketowns" -- all as prolegomena to his conclusions.

In his discussions of early forms of the city, one finds little support for the criticism that Mumford suffered from "anti-urban" bias.[10] But he certainly had strong views on good versus evil cities. Anticipating some of the very current theories of Manuel Castells on the "informational city," he extols the city as "a complex receptacle for maximizing the possibilities of human interaction and passing on the contents of civilization;" he calls the city a special receptacle for storing and transmitting messages.[11] In its finest incarnation, the city is liberating; it is a special environment

> **<u>for making persons</u>: beings who were more fully open to the realities of the cosmos, more ready to transcend the claims of tribal society and custom, more capable of assimilating old values and creating new ones, of making decisions and taking new directions, than their fellows in more limited situations.[12]**

The epitome of this type of liberating city he found in the Greek Polis, and especially Athens. But the dark side he found in its petrification under Hellenism and its final stage in Rome as the ultimate city of death (necropolis). I cannot resist quoting at length because the following passage illustrates inimitable Mumfordian style.

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[10]He is listed by Morton and Lucia White, in their <u>The Intellectual and the City</u>, as one of the most

[11]<u>The City in History</u>, p. 87.

[12]<u>The City in History</u>, p. 99. Italics added.

> **Urban life had begun in Greece as an animated conversation and had degenerated [in Hellenism] into a crude agon.... [T]he conversation ceased.... What was left was a mere spectacle, a show staged before a passive audience.... The city thus ceased to be a stage for a significant drama in which everyone had a role, with lines to speak; it became rather a pompous show place for power....<u>What paraded as town planning in the Hellenistic Age was not unrelated to the kind of smooth lies and insidious perversions that go under the name of public relations and advertising in the American economy today</u>.**[13]

But even worse was to come. ROME.

In his diatribe against Rome were all the criticisms he had leveled against New York City in many of his articles. Calling Rome an overly large and dense necropolis, he opined:

> **Rome's order, Rome's justice, Rome's peace, were built on a savage exploitation and suppression. At its highest point, Rome was an oak whose wide-spreading branches hid the rottenness that was eating from within at the base of the trunk.... Predatory success underwrote sickening parasitic failure.**[14]

He applies to megalopolitan Rome other terms invented by

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[13]<u>The City in History</u>, p. 196. Italics added.

[14]<u>The Culture of Cities</u>, pp. 227-28.

Patrick Geddes: "parasitopolis" [city of parasites] and "pathopolis" [city of diseases],[15] and also takes from Geddes both the term and the horror at mindless "conurbation" -- the unending growing together of dull cityscapes, with no greenery, no breathing spaces, in short: unplanned, endless, undistinguished low density sprawl!!

Chapter 17 of The City in History, entitled "The Myth of Megalopolis," finally gets to the heart of his argument, but by then we have read more than 500 pages. And we realize that not only this very long book, but Mumford's very long productive life devoted to understanding cities, was remarkably coherent and consistent. Throughout, he had elaborated and applied the values and lessons he had first read at the age of 18!

Having railed against both too much bigness in city centers as causing alienation and fascism, and mass suburbia (what he calls the anti-city), as destroying nature and civic culture, he then returns to the tiny book of Ebenezer Howard for his solution. He notes that Howard "saw that the growth of the big city was self-defeating" and believed that "both the prevalent apoplexy of the urban center, and the paralysis at the extremities" could be overcome by proper planning.

> **Against the purposeless mass congestion of the big metropolis, with its slums, its industrial pollution, and its lengthening journeys to work, Howard opposed a**

[15]Ibid., p. 230.

> more organic kind of city: a city limited from the beginning in numbers and density..., limited in area, organized to carry on all the essential functions of an urban community, business, industry, administration, education: equipped too with a sufficient number of public parks and private gardens to guard health and keep the whole environment sweet.[16]

The City in History culminates in its final chapter 18. It exhorts us to create anew the "good life" that the city is capable of fostering, while struggling against the "darker contributions of urban civilization: war, slavery, vocational overspecialization, and in many places, a persistent orientation toward death."

How are we to sum up this man who so passionately loved and criticized the city -- usually from his neat desk in exurbia? Was he an original scholar? Is he worth reading again? Does he still speak to us today? Let me offer some tentative answers to these questions.

Throughout his life, Lewis Mumford was not so much a writer as a prophet and sermonizer. Although he had sworn in 1935 that he would deliver no more lectures on behalf of good causes, he then devoted his life to putting those lectures between the covers of books. His books are passionate pleas for a humane regional city -- wisely planned as a whole, but built piecemeal

[16]Ibid., p. 515.

by adding small, liveable, organic social and economic units where human life can be meaningful and satisfying, and where democracy can flourish.

All his scholarship, some of it superseded by now and some certainly flawed -- in the sense that he ignored other cultures and their cities (there is no mention of China, for example) and treated the contemporary American city as part of a single Eurocentric evolutionary line --, was in the service of his passionate commitments.

Those commitments remain as relevant today as they were in his lifetime, even though the balance between large cities and their suburbs has altered significantly. With more than half of Americans now living in suburbs of increasing ethnic and economic diversity, and with center cities housing both the elite and the poor at too high densities, it might appear that a new resolution has been reached between cities and suburbs. But as the environmentalists remind us, this resolution has been achieved at great cost to the natural world Mumford wanted so much to preserve. We are still seeking forms of rational regional planning that can balance demands for cities and for nature.

We are also still seeking a balance between order and excitement. While I personally believe that Mumford too easily dismissed the living chaos of great cities [remember how neat his desk was and how often the goals of "order" are emphasized in his writings?], we are still looking for ways to enhance civic responsibility and to enlarge democracy by reducing the

atomization and mass culture.

Furthermore, many of the solutions he advocated are now being revived (some say travestied) by proponents of new towns, under the banner of "The New Urbanism."[17]

So it would be unfair to accuse Mumford of simply "recycling" old ideas. They are coming around again, and the battle lines on which Mumford unabashedly stood firm for his entire life are still there. The ideas of Howard, Geddes, Unwin, Stein, and Mumford, are newly invoked to prop up the "new urbanism," just as the proponents of the city of disorder and surprise, dirt and all, continue to defend the living chaos of the city.

The conversation, in short, continues, while the forces of capitalism and what Mumford referred to as "pecuniary interests" continue to prevail. So yes, it is still very valuable to read Mumford. One admires his single-minded devotion to the values of freedom and responsibility, his humanism and his passion. It is very exciting to know that a Center has been established, not only in his honor, but to preserve and perpetuate the conversation about "good cities" to which he devoted his life. He was a great talker, well worth listening to.

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[17]See the article by Paul Goldberger, "It Takes a Village," in The New Yorker of March 27, 2000, pp. 128, 129, 131-34.